



# ZEN

## and the Art of Briefing

By Cdr. R.P. Papadakis

I listened in stunned amazement as a young JO briefed the mission objectives: "Protect the good guys, kill the bad guys, win the war, and kiss the girls."

Where was I? In the theater watching a film from World War II? The event involved unit-level training between large-force exercises during Cope Thunder in Alaska. This was the young ECMO's first chance at briefing a section since he departed the FRS. We had an extensive debrief afterward—all the more grueling for our lieutenant junior grade because the event was eventually cancelled for weather.

This particular brief only solidified my theory that a flight never can be of higher quality than the brief. All the essential information to the mission must be communicated clearly during the brief, or the mission is doomed in the chocks. Have we all muddled through missions where everyone walked out of the mass brief scratching their heads? Absolutely. Should this be "ops normal"? Absolutely not.

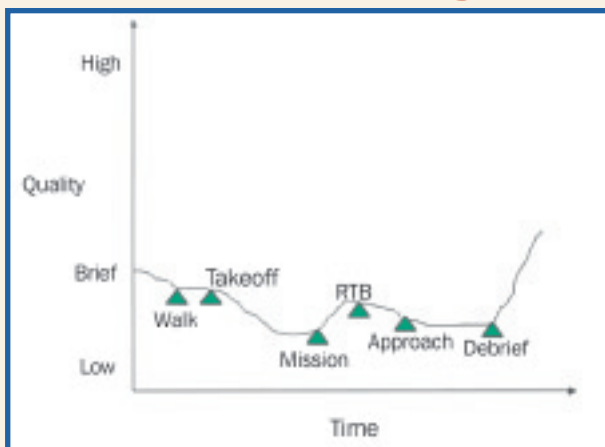
Two examples illustrate the extreme boundaries of this theory: the single-aircraft, unit-level-training sortie and the multiplane, multiservice, multinational aluminum cloud over the beach.

## Basic Unit-Level Training From “Home Plate”

From an ORM perspective, this type of hop has the potential to be the most dangerous because of complacency. Having said that, basic training possibly can recover from a shoddy brief. Do I recommend this briefing technique? Obviously not, but one can recover somewhat in a mission where everyone is very familiar with all of the mission aspects.

Let’s use a single EA-6B, SEAD mission, out of NAS Whidbey as an example. All the aircrew are familiar with getting in and out of NASWI. They can spout HARM timelines in their sleep and just about have the FCC-jammer-deconfliction frequencies memorized. How hard can this be? Here’s a graphical depiction:

### Unit Level Training



**Brief.** Fairly low quality. Whether driven by complacency or myriad other reasons, this crew was not “wowed” by their briefer before they walked.

**Brief to walk.** The decline in quality here is attributable to confusion and unanswered questions from the brief. The “fog of war” rolls in.

**Takeoff to mission.** “Wow, I guess we should have looked at the NOTAMS more closely...I’ve never flown that departure before...and what were the altitudes in the MOA again?”

**Mission to RTB.** Fortunately, our crew is very proficient here. They pick up some quality points by executing the mission very well. Unfortunately, this spike results from experience, not preparation.

**RTB to approach.** “Wow! Center sure was testy today. We didn’t really try to exit from the FLIP point, but they knew we were in there. The ILS is down? I didn’t know that.”

**Approach to debrief.** “Quiet hours for the next 10 minutes? I guess we’ll go to the penalty box until we can shoot the approach.”

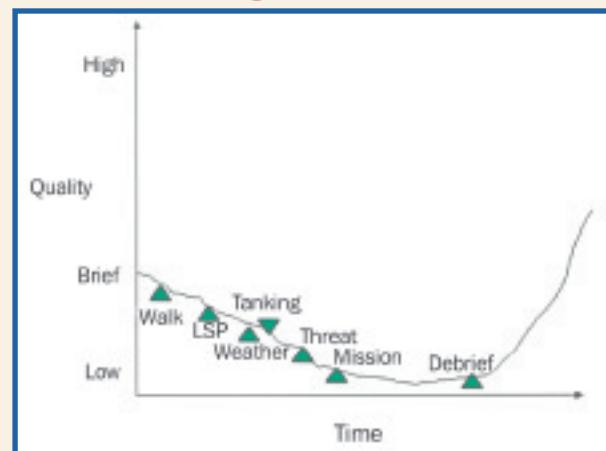
**Debrief.** On a hop such as this, the steepest positive slope occurs during the debrief. The mission never had a chance, but, all hands can learn from their mistakes and should prepare more thoroughly for the next mission.

## Going “Downtown” With a Large Strike Package

While a unit-level-training sortie might survive a poor brief, any formula that includes a poor brief can be deadly in combat. At the very least, the briefer’s professional reputation will be marred, and aircrew will return to the debrief shaking their heads, saying, “I’ll never do that again.”

The graphic that follows depicts a poorly briefed, complex-strike mission:

### Going Downtown



**Brief to walk.** Again, we see the “fog of war” settling in, with one exception: This time, it is not merely a euphemism. These crews are walking to war.

**Walk to LSP.** “What LSP?” shouted the handler 30 minutes before launch. The same scenario was being played out at an expeditionary airfield